

# **Conceptualising service-learning in global times**

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## **Introduction**

Globalisation offers unique challenges to the field of service-learning. Todd (2009) notes varying references to globalisation including “rampant capitalism, vast international migration, ecological fragility, technological interconnectivity, cultural hybridity, and reconfiguration of political power” (p.23). Responding to such conceptions evoke varying possible service-learning approaches and multiple responses dependent upon context. The purpose of this article is to open up different ways of thinking about service-learning and to raise the level of debate about the implications of selecting varying theoretical approaches within university settings. Firstly, we will frame service-learning within a global context and consider the implications of this. Secondly, we will offer traditional, critical and post-critical conceptualisations of service-learning and provide a critique in order to promote debate about contributions and limitations.

We began a journey toward understanding service-learning as a pedagogical tool while teaching teacher education students primarily through a critical theoretical paradigm. Service-learning is a pedagogical approach that combines community service with classroom based preparation and reflection. Seeking outlets for teaching students to take socio-critical action beyond the classroom, we found that service-learning had something practical and tangible to offer. It became clear to us that while the vast majority of service-learning projects drew upon traditional structural-functionalist approaches, a number of teacher educators were exploring a critical approach to service-learning and this reflected well with our own theoretical positioning. However, while participating in a recent research study exploring shifting conceptualisations of knowledge and learning, we began to critique critical service-learning approaches and to consider other possibilities through an exploration of post-structural and post-colonial theories. Consequently we have begun to conceptualise a post-critical approach to service-learning and are interested in exploring the contribution that this possibility could offer to the field of service-learning.

## **Globalisation Context and Implications for Service-learning**

Globalisation is a complex phenomenon, with multiple definitions. Typically, globalisation is defined with references to international connectedness (political, economic, and through telecommunications). Bhagwati (2004) describes globalisation as the process of local, regional, and national economies integrating into a global network; facilitated by the advances of technology and the shifting of economic and trade regulating institutions from the nation/state to the World Trade Organisation (WTO), World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Held (1999) defines globalisation as a “process (or set of processes) which embodies a transformation in the spatial organization of social relations and transactions - assessed in terms of their extensity, intensity, velocity and impact - generating transcontinental or inter-regional

flows and networks of activity” (p. 16). Furthermore, Giddens (1990) defines globalisation as “the intensification of worldwide social relations which link distant localities in such a way that local happenings are shaped by events occurring many miles away and vice versa” (p. 64).

Globalisation is fraught with contradictions and paradoxes. Firstly, the advancement in telecommunications connects people and allows transactions of information to occur globally. This occurrence provides the opportunity for an understanding and appreciation of cultural difference, as well as the opportunity for the advancement of prejudice, racism, nationalism, and xenophobia (Held, 1999). Another paradox is the rise of international advocacy and human rights groups involved in promoting social justice juxtaposed to global terrorism, slavery, weapons and drug trafficking (Ahmed, 1995; Held, 1999). A third paradox is that while some economies thrive, others are seen to wither. Globalising trends have widened the gap between the richest and poorest regions of the globe (Falk, 2000). For example the United Nations (2005) reports that from 1820 to 2005 the income of the richest 20 percent to the poorest 20 percent has increased from 3:1 to 103:1 and now “the world’s richest 500 individuals have a combined income greater than that of the poorest 416 million” (p. 4).

The paradoxes of globalisation cause tensions on a number of levels including between different cultures either coexisting or clashing (Bryan & Vavrus, 2005). These paradoxes can be explored by separating globalisation into different parts. Olssen (2004) separates globalisation into two distinguished forms: one which attests to international connectedness and the other that ascribes to neoliberal policy. Neoliberal globalisation favours deregulation and liberalisation of government policy and privatisation and marketisation leaving international institutions such as the WTO and IMF to regulate trade and the flow of capital. Keith (2005), in seeking to link globalisation to service-learning implications, further separates globalisation into three components: neoliberalism, time-space compression and globalism. She describes neoliberalism as people seeking to maximise profits, democracy as being expressed through freedom of consumer choice, dichotomy of self and other, and intensification of inequality and social divisions. The implications for service-learning, she argues, are that we need to resist the neoliberal views of people as rational, calculable, and as human capital; that meeting community needs is not a transformation of citizens into consumers; and that charity viewed within the dichotomy of self (haves) and other (have-nots) is highly problematic as it assumes there is one right way of knowing and being.

The second component of globalisation that Keith (2005) explores is time-space compression and this is implicated in the transformation of the ways people live, experience and connect with others in their community. For example, eating McDonalds in a restaurant in Japan and having sushi in a restaurant in Los Angeles. Time-space compression allows communities and cultures to defy geographical location and permits the consumption of readymade goods and a multiplicity of choices of identities and communities. Possible implications for service-learning could be the need to see culture as a resource for community-building and to develop inward and outward oriented projects that support identities and communities (Keith, 2005).

Finally, Keith describes globalism as acknowledging and celebrating people’s differences; viewing people as contradictory and subjective with multiple identities; valuing social justice and the importance of dialogue and addressing conflict; and supporting interconnectedness, interdependence and the struggles of the Other. These constructs have significant implications for service-learning in creating spaces for relationships with the Other, and in supporting dialogue as an approach to viewing diversity as an opportunity to learn across difference.

## Exploring and Deconstructing Traditional and Critical Service-learning Approaches

Traditional service-learning approaches are based on a dichotomous premise that there are two groups of people: those who 'have' and those who 'have not'; that is, the privileged and the underprivileged; us and the Other (Bruce, Martin & Brown, 2010). The general premise of traditional service-learning is that students participating in service-learning projects are among the 'haves' and the purpose of service-learning is to develop charitable notions among them. Given curriculum constraints, such as time limitations, service-learning projects tend to be in this approach, highly programmed and predetermined. The teacher's role tends to be one of technocratic 'expert' and students assume the role of 'knowers' and 'helpers' in their work among the served. Projects operate at a direct and tangible level of assistance e.g. soup kitchens, food bank collections, and after school programmes for 'needy' children.

While traditional service-learning may offer fruitful opportunities for both the server and the served, difficulties may also present as the three aspects of globalisation – neoliberalism, time-space compression and globalism – impact the way community needs and social action are provided. It has been argued that traditional service-learning may become problematic where "charity" is proposed in the absence of a curriculum that promotes socio-critical thinking that challenges taken-for-granted assumptions about societal problems (Bruce, Martin, & Brown, 2010; Kendall, 1990; Mitchell, 2007). Wade (2000) notes that service-learning educators often work to "create meaningful changes in society [but rarely challenge] students [to] consider whether some injustice has created the need for service in the first place [and] nor do they...address injustice through advocacy or political action" (p. 1). In response to this limitation, critical pedagogues have recognised the need to combine critical theory or the thinking about a social problem with the practice of doing community service, into the praxis of service-learning (see for example Hart, 2006).

Critical service-learning (CSL) has been proposed as a model that engages students in examining power imbalances and social inequalities in order to take social action (Rhoads, 1997; Rice & Pollack, 2000; Rosenberger, 2000). CSL draws upon critical theory and critical pedagogical practices. Mitchell (2007) defines CSL as "a social-justice oriented approach to...service-learning" (p. 101). CSL may be further understood through Keith's (2005) implications of neo-liberalism, time-space compression and globalism as aspects of globalisation. For example, a neoliberal (traditional) view of service-learning in the context of globalisation is viewed as a charitable service to those 'who are less fortunate,' whereas a CSL approach "fosters a justice-oriented framework...that makes possible the questioning and disruption of unexamined and all too often oppressive binaries of how we view the struggle toward equity" (Butin, 2007, p. 1). This is a key tenet of CSL and a distinguishing difference from traditional service-learning programmes that are unlikely to resist the neoliberal view of transforming citizens and cultures into consumers or human capital.

The aspect of time-space compression of globalisation is also addressed in some instances of CSL through the problematising of community, by seeing culture as a resource for community building rather than as an obstacle to be overcome (Rosenberger, 2000). Furthermore, the aspect of globalism is considered through the "promotion and empowerment of the voices and practices of disempowered and non-dominant groups in society" (Butin, 2005, p. 90) and through "students, teachers and community members [being] challenged to question the predominant and hegemonic norms of who controls, defines and limits access to knowledge and power" (Butin, 2003, p. 1682).

For CSL to be successful students need to be encouraged to critically reflect on and “examine the tasks at hand, develop plans for dealing with the obvious and unexpected...take social action, and...consider how these actions are understandable given other academic and life knowledge” (Hecht, 2003, p. 28). CSL projects have sought to respond to the limitations of traditional service-learning (including for example, notions of ‘charity’ and prescribed, pre-empted programming) through the adoption of a critical pedagogical approach. However, as CSL is deconstructed, similar limitations become evident. Even use of the term *service-learning* is suggestive of the existence of constructs like privilege and power.

Within CSL projects, contradictions exist, in so far as while the aim is to educate, advocate and act for social change, in many instances projects are complicit in contributing to the very problem that they profess to resist. Take for example the term ‘poverty’ or the idea of ‘alleviating poverty’. Who decides what poverty is? Is, for example, a lack of education synonymous with poverty? And why would we believe this to be so? Furthermore, if service-learning projects were to assist in developing education programmes, one is led to ask, ‘education of what purpose and for whose benefit?’, and, ‘whose knowledge is taught and who determines what knowledge is valid?’ It is likely that through many CSL projects, a neoliberal, Eurocentric agenda is unwittingly advanced (Bruce, Martin & Brown, 2010; Mitchell, 2007). Even as CSL educators act and move forward in resistance, in adopting this approach it would be necessary to acknowledge complicity in reproducing a system that is also criticised; and yet rather than become paralysed, educators may journey continuously in a state of reflexivity, asking difficult and unsettling questions from within. Take for example, the term ‘wealth’ or the idea of ‘the distribution of wealth’. Educators and their students would benefit from wrestling with these concepts. Who, for example, decides what wealth is? Is, for example, a lack of social consciousness synonymous with wealth? And why would we believe this to be so? By practising hyper-self reflexivity, we may journey forward without paralysis; realising “that the struggle is not about ‘us’ and ‘them’, but about ‘us all’, always” (Andreotti & Dowling, 2004, p. 611).

Another aspect of service-learning is centred on the idea of service, and the dichotomy of the server and the served. While a number of CSL writings have sought to wrestle with these ideas, contradictions regarding the reproductive nature of notions of privilege and power continue to exist (Keith, 2005; Rosenberger, 2000). This occurs in most service-learning programmes as the server is doing something ‘for’ the served, and rarely is the idea of two groups working together implemented in a way that is mutually beneficial, reciprocal, and non-hierarchical. Kendall (1990) articulates this struggle,

We were learning that without an emphasis on the relationship between the server and “those served” as a reciprocal exchange between equals, that relationship can easily be broken down....paternalism, unequal relationships between the parties involved and a tendency to focus only on charity – “doing for” or “helping others” – rather than on supporting others to meet their own needs all become gaping pitfalls... (p. 9-10).

Yet even here, Kendall (1990) posits the idea that there is a group who has needs and a group who can meet these. Many CSL projects continue to assume that there is a group who have legitimate knowledge and a group that require this, rather than being relationally focused, considering the possibility of shared power and diversity in conceptualisations of ‘legitimate’ knowledge (Cook, 2008; Kendall, 1990; King, 2004). Responding to this dilemma, Keith (2005) explores notions of reciprocity and then proposes interdependence as a more useful concept. Reciprocity may be defined in the service-learning context as a contractual relationship, where students and community

members are involved in an exchange of both giving and receiving. Keith observes however that “shifting from paternalism and charity to this version of exchange theory does not provide solid enough grounding for...equitable and respectful relationship” (p.15). She went on to propose that,

service-learning must involve more than contractual relationships, calling for dialogue not only as an exchange of ideas but as an encounter between fellow human beings. Service-learning educators need to promote the interdependence of partners rather than the reciprocity between server and served (p.15).

Interdependence shifts traditional notions of a server and a served toward a relationship of being together in responsibility toward each other (Andreotti, 2007). This critical shift in relationship sparks the possibility of a new form of education-community links: one that is based on openness and dialogue, that centres on understanding difference (not seen as deficiency), and that places an emphasis on relationship rather than service. Such a shift would capture what Keith (2005) names identity needs rather than material needs. In this way, one may say to dialogue is to act.

While dialogue may lead to more concrete collaborative action, if an ethical relationship is defined as one where people have responsibility toward each other, it would not be possible for any action to be predetermined outside of meaningful dialogue and interdependent relationship (Andreotti, 2007; Rosenberger, 2000). At least two components of service-learning both in the traditional and critical schools are now problematised further through a re-conceptualisation of relationship to one of interdependence and responsibility toward each other. Firstly, as mentioned above, the idea of existing or predetermined projects become redundant as it is not possible to determine this outside of establishing interdependence. Secondly, to establish interdependence takes significant time and is unlikely to exist fully within the bounds of that which a semester long course may be able to offer. Keith (2005) articulates this by signalling that through time space compression and an emphasis on choice, many people exist in a hyper-transient society and because of a belief “that all things come to [them] readymade...[they will] opt out at the first sign of conflict, difficulty, or boredom” (p.11). The complexities involved in seeking to develop interdependence seem to be fraught with difficulty. Time is needed to unlearn, and to generate conscientisation and awareness of important notions such as complicity, self-reflexivity and an understanding of structural inequalities (Andreotti, 2007; Keith, 2005; Rosenberger, 2000).

## **Exploring and Deconstructing Post-critical/relational Approaches to Service-learning**

Many CSL educators have sought to embed service-learning experiences within curriculum that is socio-critical in nature (Boyle-Baise & Sleeter, 2000; Bruce, Martin & Brown, 2010; Keith, 2005; O’Grady, 2000; Rosenberger, 2000). Integral to this curriculum is a critical reading of constructs such as globalisation, neo-liberalism, and the reproduction (and new productions) of structural inequalities. Another oft cited curriculum component is awareness-raising regarding privilege and power (King, 2004; Rosenberger, 2000). However, readings of this seem to indicate complicity in the reproduction of privilege as students who ‘serve’ understand their role to be one of ‘helper’ and ‘knower’; discounting the possibility that the Other could be so too (Keith, 2005; O’Grady, 2000). Andreotti and de Souza (2008) provide a counter pedagogical possibility in the concept of unlearning privilege that may be very useful in constructing a post-critical/relational approach to service-learning. They propose that to unlearn privilege (learning to unlearn) one is encouraged to consider that there are other ways

of knowing and of being that are legitimate, valid and worthy of existing. In this process an acknowledgement emerges of "one's partiality of perspectives, the importance of situated-ness and the context dependency of language" (Andreotti & de Souza, 2008, p.28). Freire (1998) explores the possibility of partiality of knowledge when he writes that in order to safeguard himself against the pitfalls of fixed ideology it was important to

...allow myself to be open to differences and to refuse the entrenched dogmatism that makes me incapable of learning anything new. In essence, the correct posture of one who does not consider him- or herself to be the sole possessor of the truth or the passive object of ideology or gossip is the attitude of permanent openness. Openness to approaching and being approached, to questioning and being questioned, to agreeing and disagreeing...knowing that I am learning to be who I am by relating to what is my opposite (p. 119).

Andreotti & de Souza (2008), drawing upon post-structuralist and post-colonialist theoretical positions (Spivak, 1999), have developed pedagogical processes that could be significant in re-imagining service-learning. In addition to learning to unlearn, these processes include concepts of learning to listen, learning to learn and learning to reach out. Learning to listen requires that students (and service-learning educators) develop hyper self-reflexivity through keeping "perceptions constantly under scrutiny, tracing the origins and implications of our assumptions" (Andreotti & de Souza, 2008, p. 28). Learning to listen means being truly open to other epistemological and ontological thought, understanding that these are social constructs and as such are historically and contextually variable. Learning to learn, through a state of humility allows students to imagine other possibilities and to begin to expand their comfort zones through the taking in of different thoughts, beliefs, attitudes and understandings. Finally, learning to reach out explores the uncertainties and complexities in relating to the Other, and in establishing responsibility toward each other (Andreotti & de Souza, 2008). Post-critical/relational service-learning experiences could be framed through this way of learning to reach out; in humility, openness and self-reflexivity, and in recognising partiality of knowledge and preparedness to listen. Reaching out (or service-learning experiences) conceptualised in this way and grounded in a careful structuring of curriculum, could provide an alternative possibility to the traditional and critical schools.

A post-critical/relational approach to service-learning however, also has limitations. For example, programming cannot be fixed or centred on an already decided project and this could make planning very difficult given that there are curriculum time constraints that ordinarily exist within a typical semester long course of study (Rosenberger, 2000). Part of this difficulty stems from the notion that the project is relational and dialogical first and foremost. To dialogue in relationship with the Other is to question the binary of action and reflection. The webbed processes of learning to unlearn, learning to listen, learning to learn and learning to reach out are interconnected, fluid and non-linear (Andreotti & de Souza, 2008). If the idea of interdependence and responsibility toward each other through meaningful engagement and relationship were to be seriously considered significant time restraints and barriers could hinder development.

Another possible problem within a post-critical/relational approach is the likelihood that absolute rather than contextual relativism could be adopted. That is, the idea that anything goes, versus an understanding of decisions made being both ethically responsible and contextually dependent. In fact the decision to select any one of the three approaches articulated in this article may be further critiqued through an understanding of context dependency. That is to say that there are times when one approach will be more desirable than another and an understanding of the theoretical positioning and philosophical underpinnings of each approach is required in order that

decisions made are contextually based and ethically oriented. Part of this process requires both an epistemological and ontological understanding that knowledge is socially constructed, partial and contextually variable. This positioning is incongruent with the notion that knowledge is certain, fixed and universal. For example, academic teacher education communities may be wedded to one way of knowing and practitioners another. Andreotti (forthcoming) notes that contextual relativism requires that practitioners are able “to read across different contexts and epistemologies scanning for different solutions to complex problems”. Deciding upon the most appropriate service-learning approach is more likely to be realised through this ability to ‘read’ in such a way.

## Conclusion

Three contradictory service-learning approaches have been partially explored and critically examined in this article. Each approach has presented distinct variations in epistemological positionings and consequent practical outworkings. It has been suggested here that service-learning may be advanced through a critical reading of the varying approaches and through an understanding of contextuality. For example, through a brief analysis, we have suggested that the establishment of service-learning as a modernist construct may be problematic as it is embedded in epistemological and ontological ideas of fixed truth and knowledge and in the ‘helping imperative’, presenting what Kendall (1990) coins “gaping pitfalls” (p.10). Furthermore, understanding globalisation through constructs such as neo-liberalism, time space compression and globalism has signalled the need to continually re-imagine service-learning and to exercise hyper-reflexivity as educators potentially complicit in the reproduction of oppressive systems (Keith, 2005).

Additionally, we have suggested that the term *service-learning* may also be problematic as it implies a dichotomy of a server and a served and reinforces notions of privilege, hierarchy and Eurocentrism. A discursive turn toward a post-critical/relational approach may serve to disrupt practices that reproduce notions of privilege and rightness as one way of being, and in so doing sideline the idea of difference as valid or legitimate. It has been proposed that relationship with the Other through dialogue and embedded within a carefully constructed pedagogical process be explored. However, we have acknowledged that such an approach, while worthy of consideration, presents difficulties for service-learning educators in a tertiary context as traditional practices, such as that of teaching within a semester and pre-determining project outcomes prior to the course beginning, become problematic.

A critical analysis of service-learning provides a useful tool to understanding through the process of hyper-reflexivity the limitations of what currently exists, and provides the opportunity to explore possibilities and ideas for future praxis. Through the critical reading of a particular discourse, text, or conceptualisation of knowledge, taken for granted assumptions are destabilised, in order that new ways of knowing and seeing may emerge (Agger, 1991; Culler, 1982; Derrida, 1978). For educators, such a critical approach requires humility and the ability to consider the possibility of incompleteness, or “unfinishedness” (Andreotti & Dowling, 2004). While deconstructing in this way creates difficulty, Derrida argues that it is this difficulty that educates. The ability to consider difficulty and other possibilities or readings of service-learning in order that the ‘Project’ vision(s) may be more closely realised, have been considered here. The idea of the ‘impossibility of teaching’ comes to mind, and also the notion that “every deconstruction can be deconstructed” (Agger, 1991, p. 115). The presentation here of aporias and contradictions reinforces the need for service-learning educators to journey in a state of humility, self-reflexivity, and in an awareness of our own complicity and partiality of knowledge. Being able to select an approach that is considered appropriate

to a particular context may enhance the teaching and learning process and contribute to the development of global citizens who are ethically responsive to complexity, diversity and difference.

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